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## **Raising Awareness of Sex Trafficking in Southeast Manitoba**

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It's a difficult subject to broach and an issue many want to believe only affects people somewhere beyond our small town borders: the trafficking of children for sex. According to the Joy Smith Foundation, though, the problem is also very real right here in southeast Manitoba.

The Joy Smith Foundation is a charitable organization based out of Winnipeg and is one of the only organizations in the world to focus on the prevention and intervention of human trafficking as well as provide healing support for its victims.

Since 2012, the foundation has helped more than 7,000 human trafficking survivors. According to the foundation, a child is likely being groomed for the sex trade at any given time within a single kilometre of your home.

"When we hear the term human trafficking, there is still some sense that it's in another community or it's somewhere far away. It couldn't apply to me," says foundation president and CEO Janet Campbell. "But each and every one of the survivors and their families that we've connected with felt the exact same way."

In Manitoba, the average age range of entry into the sex trade is 13 years and the majority of these children are female. Ninety-three percent of Canada's sex trafficking victims are Canadian born.

Like the drug trade, human sex trafficking is a lucrative business. One trafficker can make in excess of \$280,000 per victim per year.

According to Campbell, there is a common misconception that child victims of human trafficking are on a missing children's list somewhere. But nothing could be further from the truth.

In reality, victimization most often happens in secrecy while the child lives at home and parents and siblings go completely unaware. That's because many of the introductions and stages of initial grooming happen online.

## **How Children Are Lured**

Any social media platform or online chatroom, including video game chatrooms, frequented by youth these days is going to have some lurking traffickers and informants. That doesn't mean the internet is the only risky space for kids. Anywhere where youth hang out could provide an opportunity, including shopping malls, sporting events, skateboard parks, and parties.

Most human traffickers are adult males. When befriending potential victims online, they may use software to change their appearance and voice in order to leave the impression that they're a fellow teenager looking for friendship.

Traffickers may also lure young males into their fold, attracting them with bribery in order to use them to initiate contact with girls they know.

Campbell provides the example of a student in Manitoba who was befriending female students in order to gather their personal information and share it with a trafficker. The trafficker in turn reached out to these female contacts via Instagram accounts, posing as a young friend of their schoolmate.

The reason so many young women fall for the ploy should be obvious. Traffickers are experienced groomers who understand a girl's vulnerabilities and they play on them.

Flattery is the most common way to begin a relationship, whether complimenting the girl's appearance, athleticism, or talents.

Once trust is built, she's likely to reveal more vulnerabilities, which might include feelings of being misunderstood by friends or family members. She might believe she's not loved the way she deserves, that her talents go unrecognized, or that she's not fully appreciated for the unique individual she is.

The perpetrator poses as an understanding friend or even new love interest. Experts in control and manipulation, they build a wall between the young woman and her support group. Fear tactics ensure that the girl keeps their relationship secret.

According to Campbell, this grooming process might take months. With time, the perpetrator introduces sexual innuendo and pornography, attempting to normalize them.

“The [victims] are really coerced into doing things against their will and they become paralyzed with fear,” Campbell says.

They may ask her to share lewd pictures and videos which the perpetrator can then use as blackmail, threatening to share them with family or friends if she doesn’t cooperate.

“Sextortion is happening at a very alarming rate. We often see cases of individuals that have been convinced to share an intimate photo of some type and then it’s held over them. That can be for money, but it can also be for sexual services.”

Eventually, the victim will receive requests for their attendance at parties or discreet locations of the perpetrator’s choosing.

“Oftentimes, alcohol and drugs are introduced and inhibitions go down. Then [the victim] is encouraged to participate in a [sexual] activity or act. And once that happens, the trafficker uses that as a way of gaining more control and having them do even more.”

At some point, the young woman will find herself being required to perform sexual services with strangers for a fee that is collected by the trafficker. At this stage, most often, the victim finds herself experiencing such a deep level of guilt and shame that her silence deepens.

### **Recognizing the Signs**

According to the Joy Smith Foundation, education is our greatest weapon. It’s important, they say, that every parent, caregiver, teacher, and adult in authority learn to recognize the signs that a child is being groomed.

Firstly, ask questions if the child expresses an interest in a boy or man who is several years older than they.

The appearance of new clothing, jewellery, or gifts the child doesn’t have the means to afford are key signals. As well, a sudden change in the way the child dresses or applies makeup.

Pay attention when the child goes on frequent sleepovers to a friend’s house. As well, if they develop a new circle of friends and shut out the old ones.

A change in attitude or a drop in their grades may occur. Unexplained cuts and bruises should be a point of concern.

Finally, the use of more than one cell phone would be a red flag.

### **What Can Parents Do?**

According to Campbell, there is no more effective tool for a parent than open communication and nonjudgmental listening.

“I think we need to talk to our children early and often about those [things] that will help prevent their victimization,” Campbell says. “That really includes helping them understand the dangers of the online world. [The internet is] a wonderful tool, but it can also be a real weapon. It’s important that kids really understand the steps they can take for online safety.”

Ensuring that your child understands the signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships is key. Also, help them recognize false flattery and manipulation tactics.

Children need to be taught to trust their instincts. If something feels off, it should be avoided or at least shared with a trusted adult.

Since shame and embarrassment are deeply entrenched when a child is being groomed, creating a safe space for open dialogue is key.

“Parents need to have an open line of communication with their youth so they know that it no matter what is [going on], they have a safe channel to be able to come to you and not get into trouble.”

Finally, parents should create an atmosphere of safe internet use at home. Household computers should be kept in common spaces where they’re difficult to use in secrecy. It’s also a good idea to monitor the amount of time a child spends on computers and cell phones, and to coach them never to give out passwords, their real names, their home or school address, or any other personal information online, including on social media.

Parents, too, should be cautious about sharing photos of their children on social media or in emails and texts if they’re not 100 percent assured of the legitimacy of the recipient.

### **Recovery**

While education and intervention are paramount, the stark reality is that recovery services are also needed to help victims. The Joy Smith Foundation takes care of that aspect, too.

“The healing journey is one that is complicated and it is nothing short of monumental,” Campbell says. “We care so much about the individuals that have been impacted by this. They are truly our inspiration and our heroes.”

The trauma of such an experience, she adds, leaves a lifelong mark. But Campbell’s organization has witnessed firsthand many young victims who grew up to become successful and high-functioning members of society.

The foundation works together with government, law enforcement, schools, and other agencies.

“Number one, we want to see this prevented from happening in the first place. We want our youth to be protected. We want our communities informed and engaged so that they can play a part in creating an atmosphere where this doesn’t happen.”

### **Who Is Joy Smith?**

Joy Smith is a Winnipeg native and mother to six grown children. While working as a schoolteacher, she became aware of human trafficking when one of her students fell prey.

Discovering that no laws existed in Canada to protect young children from these predators, Smith set out on a mission to change all that.

In 2004, she became a Member of Parliament and went on to make history as the first sitting MP to amend the Criminal Code twice. These amendments strengthened sentencing for traffickers and expanded Canadian law.

In 2011, she created the Joy Smith Foundation. It started as a small operation at home but has since evolved into a three-generational effort, Campbell being one of Smith’s daughters and allies in the fight.

The National Human Trafficking Education Centre (NHTEC) was launched by the foundation in 2021. This is Canada’s first and only education centre addressing human trafficking across the country. The NHTEC provides training courses and materials covering both prevention and intervention.

Through the foundation, more than 100 victims and their families received recovery support in 2023. The same year, more than 4,800 attendees took part in NHTEC’s educational

workshops and presentations. The “See the Signs” awareness campaign has garnered 335 million views online, a new podcast was launched last fall which broke into Apple’s top 200 podcasts globally. Here, listeners gain understanding and compassion as victims tell their stories.

### **How to Help**

First and foremost, Campbell says, become informed. Knowledge is power. Further, she adds that her foundation welcomes more partners.

As a not-for-profit, all their educational programming and victim support is provided free of charge, so the foundation relies heavily on the generosity of donors. Volunteers are always needed at annual fundraising events.